

PUBLIC ISSUES EDUCATION: A COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SYSTEM INITIATIVE TO IMPROVE PUBLIC DECISIONS

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Today, more than ever before, our nation's economic and social well-being rests on its ability to make informed choices regarding public issues. The complex issues facing our society defy single-sector solutions. It is necessary to create forums that bring public and private entities and interested citizens together. However, in order for a truly democratic public decision-making process to take place, citizens need assistance to become active and productive participants.

Issues confronting us at every level encompass difficult choices. Once the public becomes aware of an issue, citizens need to work together to make public choices. Such public problem solving requires discussion and debate from different perspectives. The process is often controversial because individuals' understandings, beliefs, values and specific situations lead them to prefer different solutions.

Given the differences in individuals' beliefs, values and circumstances, it is easy for viewpoints to become polarized and for public issues to harden divisions among social and economic groups. Non-adversarial discussion and debate on issues, and exploration, generation and assessment of alternative solutions are essential to making informed public choices.

The public issue decision-making process should be open and inclusive. It should incorporate extensive and informed debate and deliberation. Only when these conditions are present can the public understand and support the ensuing public policy. This is how I interpret Harry Boyte's vision for "recreating the Commonwealth." This is how I interpret the meaning of self-governance in a democracy.

Who leads this process of public decision making and problem solving? What kind of expertise does one need to "reinvent the Commonwealth?" Michael Briand of the Kettering Foundation, in a paper delivered at this conference last year, provided the response to my questions. He defines political expertise as "the ability to get people to work together to solve public problems." In his view, the purpose of political expertise is "to improve a community's ability to

understand the hard choices it must make and work together toward public judgment.”

Facts, analyses and expert opinion on consequences of various options have their role in this process. But the critical trait distinguishing effective political leaders from other actors in the process is, in Briand's view, the know-how needed for public deliberation. He challenges public policy educators to supplement their current teaching efforts with a practical educational experience that instructs young Americans how to practice democratic politics (Briand, pp. 23-24).

Improving the practice of democratic politics requires a commitment to “societal learning” that can help people operate effectively in the context of changing local, national and global realities. Our universities have an important leadership role in the societal capacity building required to improve the practice of democratic politics. There are important roles for research and teaching in this long-term process, and there also is a continuing important role for extension educators.

The Cooperative Extension System (CES) has defined Public Issues Education as “educational programs which have the objective of enhancing the society's capacity to understand and address issues of widespread concern.” The vision is to become the premier educational resource to guide Americans in relearning the practice of democratic politics. The CES Position Statement on Public Issues Education (October, 1992) articulates the vision for CES:

“With public issues education as a major component of its activities, the Cooperative Extension System is envisioned as a vital and important resource for the nation in the twenty-first century. Extension will be known for the contribution it has made through its ability to:

- initiate public discourse before positions have hardened or a crisis point is reached;
- draw all interested parties into public discourse;
- increase understanding of others' points of view;
- address controversial issues fairly;
- introduce relevant academic knowledge into public discourse, and expand the knowledge base by communicating research needs to the academic community;
- facilitate a process of active learning and discovery;
- involve participants in analysis, forecasting, strategic planning, and problem solving;
- create an understanding of complex, controversial issues;
- broaden the range of alternatives; discover new approaches and opportunities;
- increase the likelihood of collaborative solutions;

- help people and communities anticipate emerging issues and their implications.”

There are core values, beliefs and assumptions underlying vision statements like this one that are important to articulate. We have identified four that underlie public issues education. Namely, *education* as a powerful tool for improving the quality of public choices; *dialogue* among people of diverse backgrounds and points of view as important to enhancing the quality of public decisions; *willingness to negotiate*, to *share power*, and to *explore collaborative action* as essential to innovative solutions; and *capacity building* through education as the opportunity for non-participants to become involved in public discourse.

The Cooperative Extension System will fulfill its potential in public issues education to the extent that extension staff at all levels understand the need for this effort and build their own capacities in the process and content of public issues education. This initiative will fail if the majority of extension staff assume that it is the responsibility of a handful of “specialists.” We must strive to make each and every one of our staff an accomplished public issue educator if we are to realize our vision.

This is hard work for all of us—administrators, faculty and staff. We need to discuss, debate and internalize a shared vision for our role in public issues education. We need to establish mechanisms to assure program quality. We need to build internal capacity through meaningful staff development activities. We need to recognize public issue education work in reward and advancement systems. And we need to establish mechanisms for coping successfully with controversy. There is a great deal of work to do in each of these areas.

Recognizing the need for an action plan to make progress toward its vision, the Cooperative Extension System endorsed the report of a task force, created jointly by the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy and the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Extension Service. The report is titled *Public Issues Education: An Agenda for Action* (July, 1993). The agenda focuses on organizational understanding and commitment, staff development, and knowledge development and utilization. It sets goals, identifies strategies, lists actions and suggests primary responsibility for implementation of each focus area. The document will be disseminated throughout the system within the next few weeks.

This may be the “teachable moment” and a great leadership opportunity for the community of public policy educators. You have introduced and refined the “alternatives and consequences” approach as well as a variety of other approaches very useful within public issues education. You are also experts at various process specialties that are extremely important tools in conducting public issue education programs. In fact, the Farm Foundation and several experi-

enced public policy education specialists have been involved in planning the national video teleconference series on public issues education, as well as developing the Cooperative Extension System's *Agenda for Action*. In addition to providing visible leadership to building capacity throughout the organization, many of you will continue your long-standing and important function as experts in specific areas of public policy based on your disciplinary background and research interests.

For all of you who devote part of your time to professional development for extension educators, the initiative in public issues education has the potential for increasing your "class size" to the total organization and beyond. As we collectively strive to build expertise in the young generation in our classrooms on and off campus, we can also strive to instruct and empower each of our colleagues, to help them take leadership toward the goal of improving public decisions.

The need is great. This is the call to action. As public institutions and as educators we would ignore it at our own risk.

REFERENCES

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